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## Gotta Catch 'Em All

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# GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Jennifer Lynn Lombardi  
B.F.A., William Paterson University, 2010  
December 2016

In loving memory of Steven R. Lombardi.

For introducing me to the world of monsters and horror at such a young age. You knew early on in my life I was resilient and always believed that I was strong enough to challenge them, fight them, conquer them, befriend them, and finally empathize with them. You were right.

I will continue to face my fears and the future monsters that I have yet to tame.



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## PREFACE

I have regularly described my work to others using words such as bizarre and distorted, but the term I have used most often and recklessly is *grotesque*. The word *grotesque* has had a very long history in its application to the art world. It was not until graduate school that I came to understand how the term applied to my artwork, especially within the context of the contemporary art world. Before then, my perception and usage of the term was based loosely on a definition of which I had little knowledge. In order to provide the viewer with a better understanding of how my artwork is inspired and placed within the contemporary art world, I will briefly explain the history and variations of the term before introducing any further research.

The term *Grotesque*, originally a noun that translated to "of a cave," from Italian *grottesco*, described the visual culture of the Renaissance (Török, the Grotesque). These images combined an irrational juncture of human, animal and plant forms, in decorative patterns and elements of curving foliage. During the 18th century, German, French and English culture adopted the term transforming its usage into an adjective to describe the strange, fantastic, ugly, incongruous, unpleasant, or disgusting. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term *Grotesque* continued its expansion throughout all of the visual arts (Török, the Grotesque).

Literary critic and Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin would later coin the term *Grotesque Realism*, which was an important feature when describing early carnival culture. During its season, *Carnival* existed as an alternate lifestyle for people to "let off steam," by accommodating a momentary lifestyle ruled by disorder and disrespecting the official culture through parody and satire. Therefore, laughter is an important element of the carnival, as it purifies the mind and soothes fears, allowing people to view the world from a different perspective (Török, the Grotesque). According to Bakhtin the carnival, where *Grotesque Realism* exists, is a "borderline between art and life" (Török, the Grotesque). Within visual culture, the term *Grotesque* further evolves into meaning a deviation of the norm. The deviation is expressed through the imagination, as well as emotional reaction, and would intentionally provoke strong feelings such as horror, comic amusement or awe in the spectator.

Author, Frances S. Connelly would later elaborate on the *Grotesque* as being in three different categories. *Combinatory Grotesque* is comparative to collage, where elements not fitting together are combined, or when already existing things are distorted with the aim to question existing realities or to create new realities. It has been perceived as wondrous, monstrous and ridiculous. *Aberrant Grotesque* shows aberration or deviation from any ideal or convention, creating ugly exaggerated forms. These forms are described as ugly, as caricatures, formless, and abject. The third type is *Metamorphic Grotesque*, which relies on illusion and is best illustrated by surrealist imagery (Török, the Grotesque).

*Grotesque* art focuses on boundary violation with the violation emphasis on acts of chimerism or the hybrid, fusing parts between plant forms, humans, and animal bodies defying the laws of nature. The images are intended to violate our identity and disturb our life. The rebellious and hilarious nature of the *Grotesque* plays a vital role in contemporary art because its components provide the spectator with an experience that will not be forgotten, one that requires interaction, creativity, interpretation, hatred, disgust, laughter – whatever activity that contributes to the identity/self-formation of the spectator (Török, the Grotesque).

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## ABSTRACT

The ability to imagine is essential to shaping who we are, and is an important part of our humanity. Children have the ability to use aspects of their environment as their playthings, becoming the characters in their world through their sense of imagination. We lose this ability as we grow, leaving us with only memories and sentimentality. I have come to realize that my art is an expression of the longing and search to regain that ability to become fused with my imagination and my environment. I allow myself to become lost in a world of fantasy once more, and through this transcendence of time and place, speak to others and their experiences.

As a child I developed a love/hate relationship with the sense of fear and a curiosity and interest with horror and science fiction films. Even though I experienced nightmares frequently, I continued to develop an obsession of that primal and animalistic instinct. I was attracted to it in a unique way. It fueled my vivid imagination and became a coping mechanism, even in adulthood. I am interested in how humans cope with fear during early childhood and how it develops into coping with fear as adults.

*Gotta Catch 'Em All*, an exhibition of two narrative installations of ceramic and mixed media sculptures, represents and examines the differences between my childhood perception of our world and the world seen through the eyes of a child growing up in this new digital age. Surrounded by technology, imagination and a relationship with the environment seems to be fading away or morphing into something far different than what I experienced in my youth. I am curious as to how this may potentially affect their ability in confronting fears and coping with them as they age. My work is a testament to discovering these differences and the cornerstone of what fuels my artistic practice.

## INTRODUCTION

My experience in graduate school has been both challenging and rewarding. The immersive community setting has provided me with necessary tools to strengthen and foster a higher level of critical thinking and conceptual consideration. These tools have informed my studio practice, as well as given me a more focused direction in expanding my ideas. Along with the many positive experiences, graduate school can produce a lot of anxieties, stresses, and all around frustrations. My first time living away from home, moving from New Jersey to Louisiana has been as exhilarating as it has been utterly terrifying. Experiencing homesickness only added to my feelings of vulnerability. As a distraction, I found myself reminiscing fond memories from my childhood, living in moments of naïve or carefree innocence. My subconscious found comfort in these distant memories and fantasies.

*"Imagination helps to provide meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge"*  
--Gianni A. Sarcone.

Our ability to imagine and get lost in fantasy is a distinct part of our humanity. It is essential to shaping us into who we are as individuals and teaches us how to interact with the world around us. Children have a unique ability to transform their environment into their playthings, becoming the characters of their world. As we mature into adulthood we slowly lose this ability, leaving us with only memories and sentimentality. I remember the moment I lost that ability. I was 12. I set up my toys in our sandbox, but the world did not become my jungle. My toys stopped speaking to me. The innocence of my childhood was over.

My present philosophies come from a deep place in my childhood, a time when TV was watched only on rainy days, cell phones and social media practically didn't exist, and when putting on fake butterfly wings instantly gave me the ability to fly. I would engage meaningfully with the world around me, interacting with my surroundings in ways that future generations will most likely never experience. I remember enjoying tangible objects and natural elements during my playtime, as my toys, my collections. Since I played outside, I was happily immersed in the natural world. In addition, as I grew up with pets, I was nurtured by them, and have a deep respect for the animal world. This love has always played an integral role in my creative process.

Another very different component that drives my work is my love/hate relationship with horror. I love horror films, and have become obsessed with them: slasher movies, creature-features, and tales of science gone awry. They show unapologetic depictions of humans as monstrous and animalistic perpetrators of our darkest fears. Ironically, these films once terrorized my already active imagination, resulting in nightmares. Learning to use my imagination to my advantage has helped in conquering those fears, and developed into a useful tool in discovering a mature inner strength.

Most children suffer nightmares from watching something as harmless as E.T, where as my nightmares were fueled by movies like *Hellraiser*, *The Thing*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and everything else in-between. I spent most of my early childhood hidden under the covers, depending on the safety of a night-light, but still suffering from constant night terrors. My parents suffered as well, losing numerous hours of sleep trying to console my frightened mind. Eventually, enough was enough. The movie *The Thing* is where I was first introduced to the concept of monsters as sympathetic, victimized, and downright not real. I remember how traumatized I was by a scene depicting a man's severed head sprouting spider legs and crawling all over the floor. It still disturbs me. Before I could reach my parents' bedroom for my nightly consolation, my father was already on the scene. That night he explained to me what he thought were the inner mechanics behind animating a fake head to move and breathe. He told me about how monsters and humans share emotional similarities and feel things the same way we do. He concluded our conversation with the idea that I too, could be a monster if that's what I desired. Looking back, I'm sure he was just an extremely exhausted man trying to say anything he could to get his daughter to stop waking him up every night. To me, that conversation was profound.

Throughout my life, I have had many learning experiences and confrontations with the subject of fear. I remember how every summer my brother, sister and I were reluctantly thrown into the crashing waves of the ocean, forcing us to learn how to swim and not be afraid of water. Sometimes we cried hysterically as

we crawled our way back onto land. I like to think of this as a metaphor for the way I conquered my fear of monsters. I desensitized my fears by watching many horror movies. This newfound bravery began to show in my artwork, as far back as my earliest drawings, depictions of harmony, friendship, and control over the world of monsters. I lingered in the realm of my dark fantasies at length during my youth. It was my escape from the negative and darker forces I was too young to understand in my own childhood. Through this time, I fostered a deep sense of empathy and compassion for beings and creatures deviated from the normal order.

My work relives the fantastic, in a whimsical exploration. I see it functioning as an escape for both the viewer and myself. It represents childhood fears, celebrating the wildness of our imaginations. Through two narrative installations, my master's thesis exhibition *Gotta Catch 'Em All* explores the rich realm through which a child seeks to understand the world around her, and the psychological impact of this understanding. Using a combination of ceramic sculptures and chosen objects, both installations reuse the same integral characters, but within differently staged narratives. The first installation is personally influenced, capturing a pinnacle moment from childhood where I learned to grasp, understand, and control the monsters of my nightmares. The second installation is driven by curiosity, attempting to capture that same moment, but from the perspective of a child growing up in the developing digital age. Through my fascination to rediscover moments that unsettle me, I create an alternative landscape which confronts my own suspicions surrounding this new digital landscape, while also encouraging viewers to challenge their own perceptions.

## PART ONE: OUR UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP WITH FEAR

*"There's something about horror that speaks directly and instinctively to the human animal. Millions of years of evolutionary psychology have ingrained in our minds certain fear triggers – a survival instinct"*  
-- Filmmaker IQ

Human beings have a natural inclination towards subject matter that frightens, confuses, and brings into question their own mortality. In her online article *The Science of Fear: Why do I like being scared*, author and blogger for the Washington Post Rachel Feltman, offers some interesting insight into understanding the psychology behind fear. According to Margee Kerr, a sociologist who studies fear, "Humans have been scaring themselves and each other since the birth of the species, through all kinds of methods like storytelling, jumping off cliffs, and popping out to startle each other from the recesses of some dark cave. And we've done this for lots of different reasons — to build group unity, to prepare kids for life in the scary world, and, of course, to control behavior". Our bodies naturally prime us for danger, resulting in an adrenaline-boostered response called "fight or flight." So why is it that some people enjoy the thrill of feeling as though they are in danger? According to a study led by David H. Zald, Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at Vanderbilt University, the desire to poke fun at our childhood fears could come down to a slight difference in how our brain works. In addition to adrenaline, fear releases dopamine, a hormone also associated with pleasure. Dopamine works as a neurological "reward" which is important in conditioning our reflexive response mechanisms. It is the trigger that tells us to sit up and pay attention (Feltman).

Many theorists have tried to explain our psychological attraction to imagery that depicts violence and terror, but most studies are ultimately disproven. One of the most famous among this Psychoanalytic community, is Sigmund Freud who posited that horror came from the "Uncanny" – emergence of images and thoughts of the primitive id that were being suppressed by the civilized ego. Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung thought that horror movies tapped into primordial archetypes buried deep in our collective subconscious (FilmmakerIQ). Even Greek Philosopher Aristotle had his thoughts on the subject, suggesting that people were attracted to scary stories and violent dramatic plays because it gave them a chance to purge their negative emotions – a process he called *catharsis* (FilmmakerIQ). Using Aristotle's argument, we watch violent movies, subject ourselves to violent imagery, and play violent video games to release our pent up feelings of aggression. His research was later contradicted after more recent studies showed the exact opposite, suggesting that watching violence actually makes people more aggressive (FilmmakerIQ). Not surprisingly, almost all theories regarding the subject eventually get disbanded due to the complex nature of the human psyche. Personally, I don't empathize with most of the speculation surrounding our morbid fascination with horror, as I have not displayed or felt any of the supposed symptoms. What we can be certain about though is that there is a correlation between exposure to horror and the reduction of fear.

Experiencing horror and the things that unsettle us in a narrative setting, welcomes us to experience fear in a controlled environment. This invites the viewer to think rationally about his or her own fears, challenging those feelings with a higher level of insight. There is one theory about fear, which has gotten the most support from experts. The more people experience fear without real danger to themselves, the more they tame its effects on the psyche. One may even become desensitized all together. Knowing there is no real danger allows people to take the experience of fear to new levels of enjoyment and imagination (Blum).

### MONSTERS

I am fascinated by human nature. Specifically, I am interested in our relationship and connection with the rest of the natural world. We are complex, intelligent, and emotional beings, yet we are still heavily driven and motivated by a deeply engrained set of animalistic instincts. I am interested in what sets us apart from the rest of the animal world, but also in what unifies us with the other creatures on this earth. I find beauty and wonder in the very things that both separate us and connect us. Since the beginning of time,

man has differentiated us from animals using accusatory words such as “beasts” or “monsters” to clearly define those differences. This has only been in the disillusioned attempt to distract us from the reality of our own darkest of capabilities.

Monsters have been an iconic representation of our darkest fears and deepest anxieties throughout all civilizations and human history. Monsters are a ubiquitous theme in mythology, folklore, fairy tales, satire, psychology, cinema, the carnival, the circus, freak-shows, and so much more (Capasso). One of the most ancient monsters is the hybrid. These creatures, part animal (or plant), part human; convey the fundamental anxieties of human separation from the natural order. This breach between animal instinct and human knowledge has been a constant point of contention throughout our existence as a species. Monsters express the ancient complexities of our relationships to nature, concluding we are just as animal as we are human. They speak directly of our condition, our imagination, our spirituality, and our arts (Capasso).

Monsters often are categorized in two different ways: real or imaginary. Imaginary monsters are the dreamed up creations that represent violations and distortions of nature. Hybrids or chimeras are common representations of this variety. They confuse nature's boundaries by fusing mix matched body parts from multiple sources in order to create one monstrous being. The other types of monsters are real and are classified as the freaks or anomalies in nature, existing without the aid of imagination. Some common examples are conjoined twins, giants, dwarves, etc. They represent fears of the unknown or misunderstood.

Romantic obsessions with the sublime, the grotesque, the macabre, and the extreme relied heavily on the image of the monster in order to elicit a powerful emotional response. Monsters provide an unsettling reflection of the self, highlighting our flaws, weaknesses, and insecurities. There is undeniable honesty in their ugliness, which is at once terrifying as it is beautiful. The popularity of monsters in contemporary culture is just as strong as their antiquated history. They continue to infiltrate our lives through advertising, television, cartoons, film, books, comics, and other constantly evolving media forms (Capasso). Due to the powerful symbolism of fear monsters instill, it is no wonder that their continued use in art as a vehicle for expressing contemporary anxieties, continues to evolve with our ever-changing landscape. They are the embodiment of fear and can foreshadow bad things heading our way.

The monsters that most disturb us currently in our society are those that the average person knows the least about. For example, Dolly, the infamous cloned sheep, made us aware of the potential power wielded by scientists, researchers, and geneticists. Many fear that by crossing these genetic boundaries, scientists are effectively reengineering nature, which borders too closely on playing God (Uhrhane). Meddling with what naturally occurs, advances in science and technology are resulting in the creation of new monsters, ones never before seen or imagined. These new kinds of monsters, under the control of scientists, threaten to change our physical being and our very existence on planet Earth. This issue is among the most prominent sources for content and exploration in contemporary art (Uhrhane). A prominent artist who is of great personal influence, both for her imaginative hyper-realistic sculptures and for the themes she explores, is Patricia Piccinini. Her work focuses on the anxieties and speculation surrounding the curiosities of genetic engineering. Neither condemning nor encouraging, her work questions our ability to connect with and ultimately love these breeds of animal and human hybrids. What may be considered monstrosities, her creatures entice the viewer with familiar human characteristics and emotions, housed within unrecognizable and distorted bodies.

Various artists, myself included, are greatly influenced by classic sci-fi films we once viewed as children. In an unsettling twist, those very films have taken on a disconcerting new life, as most of the fantastical scenarios described are no longer the impossible. This observation has weighed heavily on my artist practice, inspiring fear and curiosity towards our inevitable future. My work is motivated by the ideas surrounding technological advancement and how it may transform childhood memories and anxieties.

Monsters test the limits that define who we are, distinguishing the self from that which belongs to the other (Unger). Monsters will continue to remain an important symbol of expressed fears and anxieties throughout all cultures. Given the unstoppable technological revolution society continues to depend on,

artists will never cease to find a voice to express their uneasiness through the character of the monster. Tales and representations of horror can provide a very therapeutic release from the discomfort of fear. It allows us to acknowledge the real fears we face everyday, but in a more approachable and playful narrative. This is especially true for children. Introducing mythical characters, hybrids, and other monsters in fairytale narratives provides a wonderful outlet in childhood fantasy, recollection, and play.

## **CHILDREN AND FEAR**

A child's fear of monsters and the unknown plays an important part in their overall understanding of the world. As we age, our anxieties gently shift from the imaginative to the realistic. Every stage of growth, both physically and cognitively, are crucial in shaping a person's understanding and ability to function in an adult society. It is important to recognize the complexity involved in our upbringing because our current understanding of the developmental phases of childhood may one day be obsolete. I want this information to engage the viewer in a personal analysis, as well as become the jumping off point for future conversation.

Fears are a common and natural occurrence during childhood, especially for children with vivid or hyperactive imaginations. Although these qualities may make a child more susceptible to fears, they are actually the basis for compassion and creativity. As with all human fears and anxieties, monsters become the visual scapegoat to represent everything that is confusing or frightening. Although the imagination may contribute to unnecessary fears, it is also one of the most important tools needed in conquering them. Children learn how to become the masters of their imagination by pretending to befriend the monsters under their beds or by even believing they are ones themselves.

As children continue to mature, they begin to distinguish fantasy from reality and later, conceptualize abstraction (Monsters of Childhood). The stages of comprehending one's fears can be broken down into at least three crucial milestones in preparation for adulthood. Children between the ages of two and nine years old learn how to understand images and words, allowing them to envision the monsters from their own imaginations. This makes them susceptible to visual or linguistic prompts, especially emphasized through the visually grotesque (Monsters of Childhood). At this age, they begin to understand the concept of death and can become fearful of animals, the dark, and supernatural monsters. Fairytales and stories use monsters as a means to control misbehavior, warning that naughty children will be confronted by unpleasant entities. This also establishes a foundational association between violence and the concept of evil (Monsters of Childhood). Before children are even capable of verbally expressing their fears, they begin to understand the reflective nature that monsters embody. Even in the earliest years of life, children are able to associate the negative characteristics of monsters and relate them back onto themselves (Monsters of Childhood). During these years, they can identify with the monsters that embody their insecurities.

As we age, our fear of frightening images decreases, allowing us to confront more grotesque imagery. During the ages of six through nine, children are able to face images that more accurately represent their fears. Playing with gruesome toys or watching frightening television shows and movies teaches them how to experience the fun of being scared (Monsters of Childhood). Toys become a perfect outlet for challenging ones fears, allowing a child to associate the abnormal or deformed with a concept of play. Through the act of imagination and role-playing, children can develop a sense of control and compassion.

The final stages of adolescent learning happen between the ages of nine and twelve years old. During these last few crucial years, children continue to use their imagination, not only to understand and confront fear, but also to garner feelings of empathy, compassion, and respect both for themselves as well as others. Children between the ages of nine and twelve begin to worry more about personal injury, the injury or harm of loved ones, and the possibility of destruction (Monsters of Childhood). Monsters, specifically focusing on the mystical or magical quality of their being, may even be used to displace real fears associated with our growing awareness of the world we live in. They become a method of escape or coping.

A child's monsters change with their changing view of the world. Their cognitive development, largely determines their relationship to a monster and how they handle fear. Monsters can be toys that aid children in dealing with basic fears of frightening creatures or, in the duration of the teenage years, become the horrific embodiment of people's deepest psychological fears. The "monsters" associated with the teenage years bring the timeline of cognitive development to that of adults (Monsters of Childhood). The monsters of adulthood become manifest through a variety of fears and taboos associated with the real world. There are countless examples of what these fears may be, but a few that I find most unsettling are violence, child abuse/neglect, ridicule, destruction of nature, oppression, intimacy with strangers (or lack there of), attempted immortality, artificial creation, prolonged youth, animalistic behavior, disconnection of humanity, and isolation.



## **PART TWO: IMAGINATION VERSUS TECHNOLOGY**

The use of fantasy in early childhood development directly relates to how adults develop an understanding of intellectual, social, moral, and aesthetic life. Using one's imagination or simply playing with imaginary friends is essential to a child's ability to cope with and adapt to stress or fear (Wang). In our adolescence, the instinctive impulse to play is innate. It is both a biological and psychological practice, necessary for learning and growth. There is a level of creativity required and developed through the act of play, using one's imagination to find solutions to problems, whether real or imagined. This teaches children how to react to a wide range of situations. Children must develop these adaptive systems so that they obtain an open disposition to the unexpected. A child's ability to cope with complicated situations relies on their adaptability and capacity to recover from the adversity faced while playing. These strategies can be used later in real life situations (Gleave, Hamilton 11).

Play can take on a variety of forms, all of which are crucial in fostering a healthy learning experience and function as we come to understand the world and our placement within it. The most essential roles it provides are in the development of the emotional, social, cognitive, and moral foundation of every human being. The act of playing in all its forms, serves a deeper purpose other than providing momentary entertainment and distraction for still growing attention spans.

Physical play promotes exercise and is a healthy outlet for excess energy. It is also important for its social benefits, teaching children how to interact and play well with others. One of its most important elements is the space in which it is conducted, outside. It allows a child to engage and connect with the environment and most importantly with nature. Manipulative play allows a child to become the master of their environment. Imagination is the most important tool for this type, giving a child a sense of control as they manipulate everything and everyone to fit their fantasy (Play, Encyclopedia). Children develop a sense of empathy through imaginary play, helping them discern the feelings of others and imagine themselves in different situations (Gleave, Hamilton 11). I fell into this category often as a child and loved getting lost in my own games. It also serves as a major outlet for coping with and conquering fears by pretending to have control over them. A final method of play worth mentioning is familiarization play, typically assuming the form of games. While video games can fit into this category, board games and puzzles played with others are most important for socialization and learning how to follow rules. It also establishes bonds between child, parent, and siblings through interaction with them (Play, Encyclopedia).

Emotionally, children learn how to cope with conflict through the act of role-playing and fantasy. Children can escape into a world of fantasy in order to better understand the real one (Play, Encyclopedia). Plays' significance in cognitive development is in teaching them how to think, speak, remember, and problem solve. Children essentially get to take the world for a test drive and learn how their thoughts and beliefs interact within it. There is a realization of the self as being separate from others and children learn about boundaries, teamwork, and negotiating different personalities (Play, Encyclopedia). Finally, one of the most important functions that play facilitates is developing a moral basis. Through these social interactions, children learn the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. They begin to understand the moral implications behind bad decisions and unfair play. The resultant lesson is having respect for themselves, for others, and for the environment in which they live (Play, Encyclopedia).

### **CHILDREN IN THE DIGITAL WORLD**

I am interested in how our experiences and the lessons learned during childhood guide us towards self-discovery in our adulthood. Children have a magical perception and understanding of the world, something that is lost once we reach an age of more critical and rational thinking. This inspires a deep sense of longing, as I want to reconnect with the magical world I was once able to see, but know that it is impossible to retrace those steps.

Living in the chaotic contemporary landscape driven by a growing dependence on technology, the pressures to assimilate and adapt as rapidly as the constantly changing environment become our primary terms for survival. This leaves little room for anything else. With so many looming stressors triggering our anxieties, it is understandable that during our adult lives we lose sight of the things that once made



the world a magical place, as well as our earliest experiences in discovering our placement within it. I am certainly guilty of this. What happens if we remain too disconnected from what originally shaped us? What happens if the very thing that shaped us was this disconnection?

The content of this next section will address the research and scientific findings currently in circulation about the digitally dependent world's impact on our youngest generations. Unfortunately, this digital revolution is still in its infancy, gaining prominence only within the past decade, so a true understanding of its effects are still widely unknown. Due to the aggressive pace in which this technology advances, doctors and scientists have little historical reference and less time to examine how these concepts will influence a child's ability to think and process information in the future. The unanswered questions in relation to this subject are both unsettling and yet, wildly intriguing. I am even more fascinated by the discoveries and effects that have been observed, prompting additional questions regarding what this all will mean for the future of humanity. These discoveries, unanswered questions, and their relation to how we experience our fears and anxieties are all a major driving force behind my conceptual analysis in relation to my work.

Through our young active imaginations, we develop an ability to cope with fear and anxiety surrounding our constantly changing landscape. The emphasis I place on these adolescent experiences is driven by my curiosity surrounding the present digital revolution and how it may be affecting our youngest generations born into it. According to the *Encyclopedia of Children's Health: Infancy through Adolescence*, the early 2000's began to notice a shift in children's interaction with the changing landscape. It was documented that children of all ages and from every socioeconomic background preferred television, computers, and battery-operated toys instead of self-directed, imaginative, and creative forms of play. This trend leaves children developmentally deprived, because imaginative and fantasy play facilitates an outlet in which to explore the world and for expressing their deepest thoughts and feelings (Play, Encyclopedia). I imagine how much this has changed in the year 2016, as the digital age dictates our daily survival.

Many of us face our own challenges as we learn how to navigate and adapt to the newest forms of technology. For those of us born before the 2000's we are experiencing this cultural shift from a very different set of eyes. I wonder what it must actually be like to grow up during the high-tech digital age? Previous generations of baby boomers, generation Xer's, and millennials (where I fall) can now welcome the newest additions to our generational family, the native born children of the digital age. Scientists and researchers are already referring to these new children as the digital natives. What makes these children especially intriguing is not only are they born into a tech-dependent world, but also the speed in which technology is progressing is evolving them a lot faster than previous generations. As adults, we struggle knowing we are becoming too dependent on our cell phones and digital devices. Many us, myself included, feel guilty or frustrated about relying on technology as a crutch, since we still remember a time where we functioned without it. These children differ from any previous generation because their understanding of the world is through the complete immersion of digital devices. As a result, there is a growing disconnection between adults and these adolescents, not only in trying to keep up with changing technologies but also in the relationships and social interactions linking the generations.

Amongst the many concerns surrounding this digital revolution is that technology is replacing the desire for human connection. So how are digital children different from previous generations? In his published article *Technology's Impact on Child Growth and Development*, David Elkind describes these differences in connection to key elements that define digital culture. Technology has resulted in a speed-dominated culture. With so many different avenues for retrieving information at the swipe of a finger, our society has grown impatient. Boredom is not an option and moments of quiet and self-reflection are becoming less common. This is also a screen culture, as all forms of media are engaged through one screen or another. Young children and adults spend the majority of their time in front of some form of screen. This makes face-to-face social interaction unnecessary since communication can be fostered through the Internet. An alarming trend is that young children feel more connected to a screen, often preferring it over real-life human interaction. Additionally, the information culture surrounding digital children renders human interaction unnecessary since anything from science to art and literature can be accessed simply at your fingertips. Lastly, this is a communication culture, offering constant access to friends, relatives, and peers

all through the use of the Internet. Ironically, this means that at every moment we are connected, while at the same time not actually making a connection.

This new culture focused around technology affects the language and concepts children learn, shaping their perceptions of reality (CIO Staff, Elkind). Children who are raised in this speed dominated setting have a different perception of time. Constant feelings of urgency can make it difficult for a child to relax or take the time to engage with their environment in an intimate way. Digital children have a different perception of space as well. The virtual realm can be addicting and since they can access any information from books to video games via the Internet, interacting with the environment is unnecessary. The desire to play outside is dwindling, given that access to a digital space is far easier. One of the biggest changes that the digital world has created is the slow extinction of the traditional culture of childhood (CIO Staff, Elkind). The language, lore, and play rituals of childhood are slowly disappearing, or in another sense, evolving. These intergenerational customs once supported the connection children had with their parents (CIO Staff, Elkind). The addictive quality of video games along with advent of social media has changed these traditions, breaking the connection linking previous generations. While video games have their positive attributes, admittedly enjoying them myself, they are not a replacement for the autonomous role that free play provides during a child's most formative years. This tendency hits particularly close to home for me. Currently at 28, an age where having my own children is a more welcomed possibility, I wonder if I will be able to connect and relate to them, given that a completely different environment will influence their childhood.

*"Thinking. The capacity to reflect, reason, and draw conclusions based on our experiences, knowledge, and insights. It's what makes us human and has enabled us to communicate, create, build, advance, and become civilized. Thinking encompasses so many aspects of who our children are and what they do; from observing, learning, remembering, questioning, and judging to innovating, arguing, deciding, and acting"*

--Jim Taylor, Ph.D

The newest technologies facilitated by the Internet are shaping our minds and how we think in both obvious and subtle ways. Whether deliberately or unintentionally, it is difficult to discern if the impact offers more benefits to our lives or are more detrimental in the long term. Children are especially vulnerable to these changes, specifically in their earliest years due to the malleability of their still growing minds (Taylor, PhD).

Overexposure to technology may have unexpected consequences on a young child's developing mind, especially in how it alters their way of thinking. According to Jim Taylor, PhD, author of *The Power of Prime: How Technology is Changing the Way Children Think and Focus*, "Research has shown that the areas in which technology has the greatest impact on how children think are: attention, information overload, decision-making, and memory/learning" (Taylor, PhD). The frequency at which digital natives are exposed to technology is actually wiring their brains in ways that are very different from previous generations (Taylor, PhD). A child's immediate environment determines the kind of attention they develop and, as with all advances throughout history, the technology that is available determines how our brains develop (Taylor, PhD). The arrival of television altered that attention by giving children visual stimuli and little requirement for imagination. Now with the invention of the Internet, children are exposed to a completely different environment, where distractions are normal making focused attention impossible and deeming the need for an imagination unnecessary. Many aspects that nurture thinking have become diminished, including our perception, language, learning, creativity, reasoning, problem solving, decision-making, and memory (Taylor, PhD).

Relying on the omnipresence of Internet search engines is rendering children less proficient in remembering things, but more skilled at remembering where to find those things. Essentially, knowing where to look is becoming more important than actually knowing (Taylor, PhD). As Doctor Jim Taylor explains, "this redirection of attention is not necessarily making our children stupid, but rather just making them different. For example, research has shown that video games and other screen media improve visual-spatial capabilities, increased attentional ability, reaction times, and the capacity to identify details among clutter" (Taylor, PhD).

While some research acknowledges the positive aspects of early immersion in the digital world, the negatives are far greater. Little more than 20 years ago, children explored the sensory world through imagination, nature, and human interaction. Children have become reliant on technology for the majority of their play, limiting their creativity and imaginations (Rowan). Being constantly bombarded with chaotic sensory stimulation hinders children from reaching developmental milestones. Children have not biologically evolved to accommodate the sedentary and chaotic nature of today's technology. This results in a variety of issues ranging anywhere from obesity to psychological disorders. According to Pediatric Occupational Therapist and biologist Cris Rowan, there are four critical factors necessary to achieve healthy child development are movement, touch, human connection, and exposure to nature, all of which are not facilitated through the digital medium.

Children are using technology as a surrogate for the learning experiences needed in understanding the real world. This results in children with heightened anxiety disorders and having a difficult time in comprehending fears and different social situations. Cris Rowan describes the reason behind these issues in her article *The Impact of Technology on the Developing Child*. She writes, "further analysis of the impact of technology on the developing child indicates that while the vestibular, proprioceptive, tactile and attachment systems are under stimulated, the visual and auditory sensory systems are in "overload." This sensory imbalance creates huge problems in overall neurological development, as the brain's anatomy, chemistry and pathways become permanently altered and impaired. Young children who are exposed to violence through TV and video games are in a high state of adrenalin and stress, as the body does not know that what they are watching is not real. Children who overuse technology report persistent body sensations of overall "shaking", increased breathing and heart rate, and a general state of "unease." This can best be described as a persistent hypervigilant sensory system, still "on alert" for the oncoming assault. While the long term effects of this chronic state of stress in the developing child are unknown, we do know that chronic stress in adults results in a weakened immune system and a variety of serious diseases and disorders."

This passage is particularly fascinating to me. To summarize some key points peaking my interest, children who are in a constant state of digital and sensory overload struggle with anxieties associated with the real world. Cris Rowan mentions that young children have a difficult time discerning whether the violence they see in their video games and on TV is real, adding to their already heightened anxieties. As I have discussed earlier in the paper, children build confidence and learn how to control their fears by imaginative role-playing and interacting with their environment. Since the digital realm renders the imagination unnecessary, children no longer have the essential tools needed for independently coping with stress and fear. This technology induced sensory overload leaves children in a perpetual state of stress, "still "on alert" for the oncoming assault." In other words, children are stuck in a continual state of "fight or flight," which, as I have also explained, is the hormonal response of primal fear.

### PART THREE: BODY OF WORK



Image 1. *Gotta Catch 'Em All*, teaser image

The element of imagination is an important theme behind my body of work, in both conceptual emphasis as well as artistic execution. All of the creatures I sculpt are a product of my own imagination, which provides a lot of opportunity for play. I can extenuate or remove different physical characteristics, distort proportions, and alter the scale. I use animal forms as a means to express the human condition, while simultaneously maintaining the animal's natural essence. Animals can de-clutter the scattered nature of our words and thoughts and simplify the sensations, despite being complex creatures themselves. The animals I create often take on more monstrous forms, becoming an amalgam of creatures, like hybrids or chimeras. I project my emotional state while I create these "monsters," and use them as an escape from my anxieties. As a result, my creatures have human emotions. Either in their facial expressions, or their posture, they communicate anguish, loneliness, vulnerability, frustrations, longing, hostility, wonder, curiosity, or playfulness. This opens up an opportunity for the viewer, who may divulge his or her own buried anxieties and insecurities, and perhaps reciprocate feeling of empathy, compassion, or disgust.

Satire and humor are important elements used within my work. The visual components of my pieces often favor depictions of the grotesque, overly distorting realistic and unnatural qualities to the point of humor. I have an affinity for fat rolls, sinuous appendages, and contorted expressions in both body and

face. Humor can make things more acceptable and can act as a nervous release for both the viewer, as well as for myself. Satire helps to tone down, yet drive a point across without outwardly demonizing my subjects of interest. It is my way of coping and brings meaning or submission to the basic and true horrors in life. Alex Pardee is an illustrative artist who has been one of the longest standing influences behind my artistic practice. I love his work for its expressive drawing style, bold line work, and vibrant and playful use of colors. He embellishes grotesque imagery, using humor and satire as his vehicle for expression. His work has inspired me to maintain a sense of humor within my own art, even when representing ideas or images that are oddly disturbing. I appreciate artwork that embraces ugly things or grotesque imagery because I am personally drawn to the uglier aspects of life.

While I intend to harmlessly “poke fun” at the way our society deals with the developing culture surrounding our dependence on the newest technology, I also hope to provide a momentary pause, albeit entertaining, that allows the viewer to reflect upon a possible innocent consequence. Although I want my audience to explore the deeper themes and content within my work, I feel that humor is a necessary tool in pushing those very ideas further. Humor invites participation and approachability to otherwise serious or grotesque subject matter. This is especially important when engaging an audience who may not share my similar interests or aesthetic.

The title of my thesis exhibition, *Gotta Catch ‘Em All*, is a phrase taken directly from a popular children’s cartoon called *Pokémon*. The animated shows’ premise is children competing to collect as many of the fantastical creatures as possible, with the intent to battle them against each other in future tournaments. The popularity of the show boasts a variety of video games for children and adults, allowing them to take on this role as a creature collector. Keeping within the context of the underlying themes of my thesis, the gaming world is about to launch a brand new technological innovation in interactive gaming called *Pokémon Go*. This new type of game is structured for the use of smart phones, allowing the gamer to play and capture these Pokémon in real time and in the real world. Players will receive cell phone alerts suggesting Pokémon within close capturing vicinity, whether you’re at your cousin’s birthday party or learning about real animals at the zoo. My concerns about technology taking precedence over a child’s ability to learn through imagination can be summed up by a direct quote taken from a gaming site promoting its upcoming release dates. “Because if anything can get people to play an augmented-reality game on their smart phones, it’s Pokémon - because you just gotta catch ‘em all.” The expected release date happens to be this summer of 2016 (Domanico, cnet).

## **MATERIALS AND PROCESS**

Using clay as my primary medium, I can take on the role of a scientific researcher looking to create new life through process and experimentation. Attention to small details is of high importance to my body of work in order to create an uncanny realism, which will resonate with the viewer. Clay has become a symbolic material for me. It goes through a series of transitory stages before reaching maturity in its fired and painted state. Similar to how a mother may nurture the transient milestones of childhood, I feel deeply connected with every growing stage of the sculpting process.

Each piece is hand sculpted using coil-building techniques, although sometimes I build solid, later hollowing it out. In the time consuming manner that I sculpt, I am forced to spend an extended period of time with the clay throughout all of its states. In its natural form, it is malleable and formative, allowing me to meticulously manipulate the textures and fleshiness in its structure.





Image 2. Stages of Sculptural Process: wet clay state, texture



Image 3. Stages of Sculptural Process: texture, detail

This first stage initiates the creature's life cycle. When bone dry, it is at its most fragile state, so I must handle my pieces with utmost care and protection until they reach the kiln. Once fired, I spend a significant amount of time painting each piece with acrylic paints and mediums. Paint awards me complete control over the final appearance. The colors are strategically chosen to extenuate each

sculptures specific characteristics, and seamlessly blended to enhance the realistic qualities of sculpted flesh. After this stage, the piece has reached maturity, becoming fully alive. In the event that a sculpture breaks before it is completed, a common problem among ceramic artists, I become quite adaptable at restoration. I exploit these opportunities and attach non-ceramic components or sculpt additional features using bondo, resin, fiberglass, and epoxy. Occasionally I add supplementary elements to the work regardless of damage.



Image 4. Stages of Sculptural Process:  
wet clay state, carving and refining



Image 5. Stages of Sculptural Process:  
fired product, assembling with Bondo



Although clay serves as the key component to my body of work, I employ the use of found and chosen objects, which complement the pieces. Incorporating real and recognizable objects within the installation adds to the uncanny and disconcerting nature of the figures, emphasizing the realm of uncertainty. For example, as seen in *Vera and her Wagon*, the sculptural qualities of the human figure provide reference to elements of the real, while her wig and floral dress anchor the unsettling connection to the familiar. The red wagon she pulls is the classic red metal Radio Flyer wagon we can all remember from childhood, sparking memories of comfort and sentimentality before being faced with the grim contents it possesses.



Image 6. *Vera and her Wagon*



## THESIS INSTALLATIONS

Rearranging my characters for two juxtaposing narrative installations, the figure of a little girl stands before her vast collection. She excitedly inspects one of her newest additions, which she clasps in her raised hand. A wagon accompanies her, filled with more pieces from her recent bounty. Her smile suggests her confidence and mastery of her environment. She is in control. Her smile is sweet, endearing and approachable, yet there is something unnerving about the expression on her face. *Vera*, as she has fondly been nicknamed, is hiding something. Her world borders a realm of playful fantasy and an unsettling reality as she adds to her collection. She is the creator and guardian, as well as the scientist behind this environment. She is *The Curator*. Her role as collector takes on new meanings, depending on the narrative that is expressed.



Image 7. *The Curator*



Image 8. *The Curator*, detail

My thesis exhibition is inspired by the memories and magic of my childhood, in conflict with personal anxieties associated with the oncoming change that the digital revolution presents. I worry about the imagination becoming an endangered species in future childhood experiences, and question the overall impact it could have if becoming extinct. The ability to imagine and explore the world in a more fantastical manner aids in so many different areas of personal growth, which we carry with us into adulthood. It is the most fundamental tool used for learning, whether it helps us in thinking, fostering relationships, developing empathy, or coping with fears. With the use of satirical undertones and dark humor, I capture a perspective that is at once entertaining and unsettling. It is to provide the viewer with a piece of entertainment, something to snicker at, but ultimately something that will return to haunt them. My work encourages a sense of playful curiosity while revealing a deeper examination into the effect that time has on our personal psychology, especially with the impressionable minds of children.

My thesis exhibition, *Gotta Catch 'Em All*, captures a moment of personal growth, where one important milestone leads to another; a moment of attaining a sense of self through the conquest of fear and the unknown. The catch is there are two different perspectives from where I explore this concept. These two narrative installations explore the importance of imagination during a person's formative years, how it plays a role in our ability to cope with fears and the facilitation of understanding reality versus fantasy, and how that could be affected by our rapidly changing world. One scene is motivated by personal memories associated with childhood, while the other poses a vision of childhood's changing values observed through our shifting environment. Using the same characters and elements for each iteration, I intend to illustrate opposing perceptions of imaginative innocence in order to initiate a dialogue about the inevitable changes happening in contemporary society.



Image 9. *Installation One: Gotta Catch 'Em All*



*Installation One* illustrates a perspective of innocence, capturing a moment of triumph, as *Vera* conquers another one of her manifested fears. Her wagon is overflowing with these *fear specimens*, each one representing some form of anxiety or uncertainty that we are conflicted with during childhood. The jar acts as a dividing wall between the conscious and subconscious, providing a protective barrier while still allowing her to safely and intimately confront them. The three creatures surrounding her are the monsters of her own imagination, but she no longer fears them. Nicknamed *Wally*, *Peckerwood*, and *Gizmo*, they have become her imaginary friends, guardians and helpers to aid her in the process of coping with the many fears associated with a growing mind.



Image 10. Creature One: *Wally*, profile



Image 11. Creature One: *Wally*, detail



Image 12. Creature Two: *Peckerwood*, detail 1



Image 13. Creature Two: *Peckerwood*, detail 2

One of her companions, *Gizmo*, even extends itself upwards on its tail in an effort to hand over the next jar. In summation, *Vera* is in an active role of participation, confronting her fears and anxieties head on and becoming the master of her own vivid imagination. This is a moment of triumph and represents her connectivity with the world around her.



Image 14. Creature Three: *Gizmo*





Image 15. *Gizmo*, moment of offering

In the same manner that a scientist might theorize a possible outcome to an uncharted experiment, I approach the conceptual narrative of my second installation in the method of a speculative researcher. This second iteration became the focus of my thesis and resulted in the final exhibition. *Installation two* is more clinical, showing the very same child more focused on the collecting of her fears, as opposed to confronting them. This scenario takes on an exploratory approach as I question how the mind of a child may perceive the world without the tools learned through the use of imagination and active play.







Image 17. *Collection*

Instead of confronting her fears head on, she seems distant, distracted, and disconnected. She appears to be more interested in organizing the actual *collection* of her *fear specimens*, rather than engaging with the items that she is collecting. A few of the same creatures can be seen throughout the installation, but maintain their distance. Her fears and monsters still exist even if they remain unaddressed.



Image 18. *Fear Specimen*, detail



Image 19. *Fear Specimens*



Image 20. *Wally*





Image 21. *Vera and Wally*



Image 22. *Predator and Prey*, full

One of these creatures has even been placed in a makeshift habitat, boxed in and forgotten, still feeding off of anxieties. There are subtle moments that hint at innocence corrupted, such as the rabbits in *Dirty Dancing* being very suggestive of sex, or the creatures in the aquarium tank embellishing the harsh reality of life, *predator and prey*, or impending death. While these elements are a part of Vera's environment, she still experiences them from a distance adding to the overarching feelings of disconnection and disassociation. While the creatures are not necessarily monsters to be afraid of, they are the embodiment of my anxieties, becoming the vessel to portray my own uneasiness.

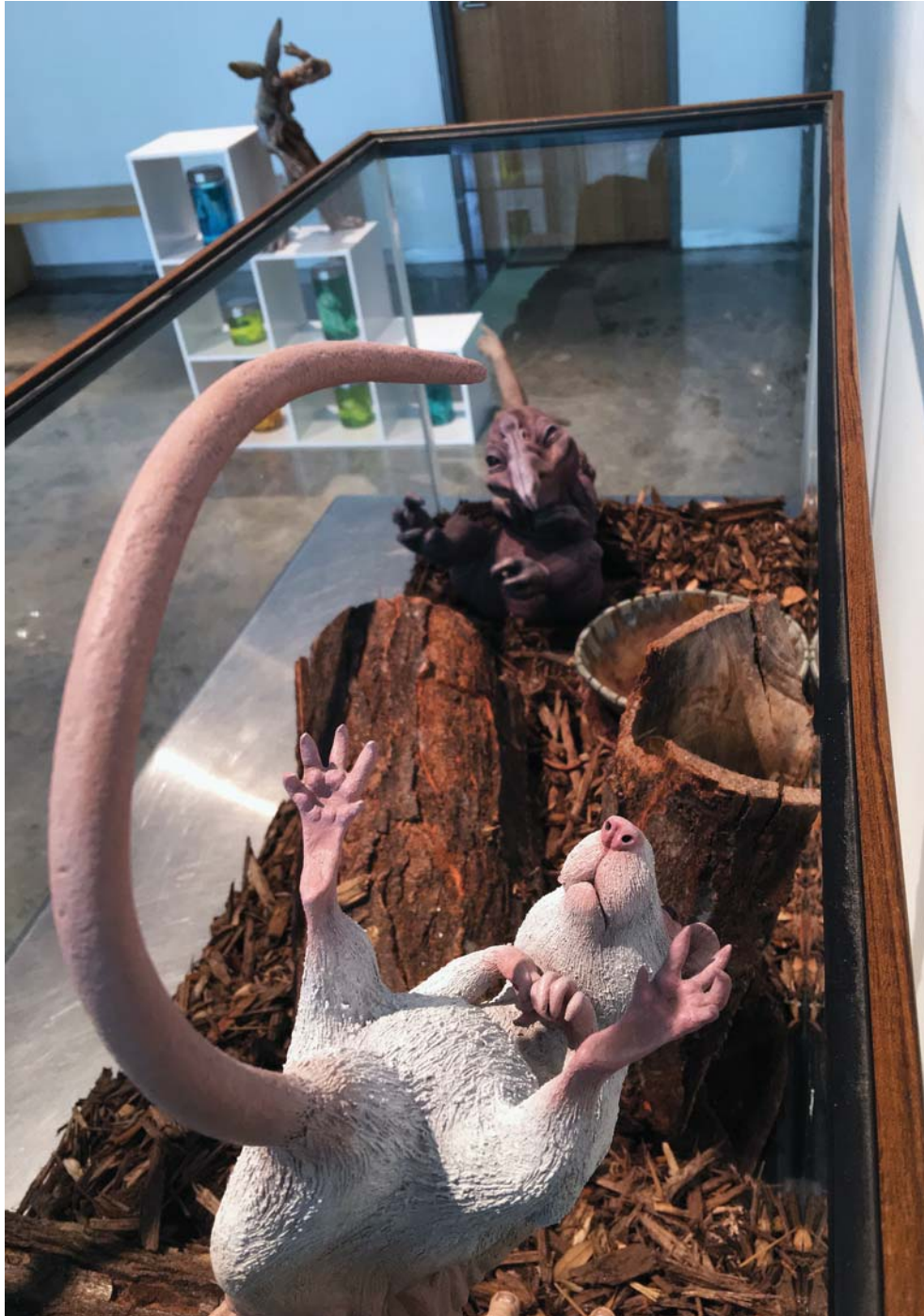


Image 23. *Predator and Prey*, detail 1





Image 24. *Predator and Prey*, detail 2



Image 25. *Dirty Dancing*



Image 26. *Dirty Dancing*, detail 1



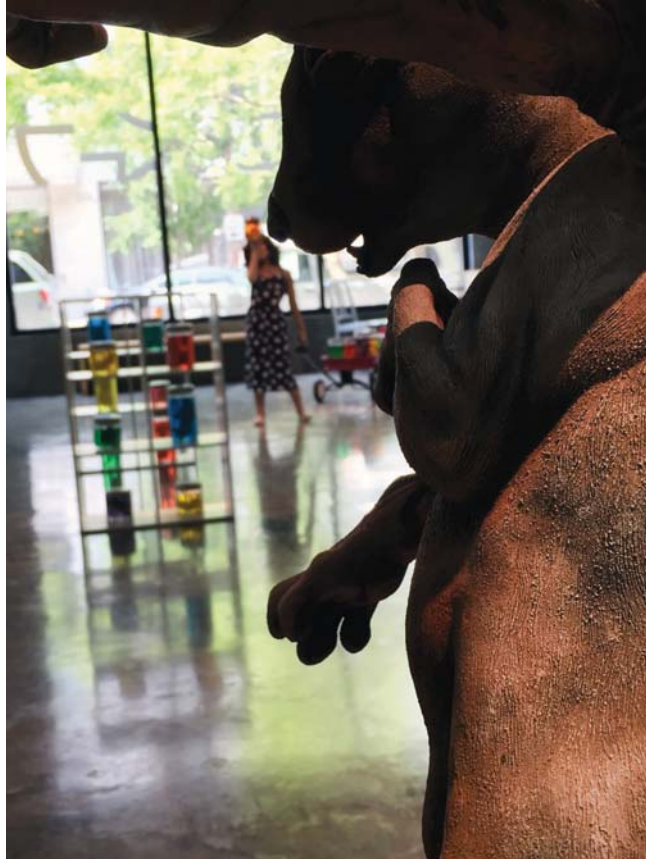


Image 27. *Dirty Dancing*, detail 2



Image 28. *Installation Two: Gotta Catch 'Em All*, alternate view

## CONCLUSION

In my adulthood I have become desensitized to horror and the fear it once was able to instill in me. Genres such as science fiction and horror fascinate my imagination, and allow me to reunite with that lost sense of fear. I want to feel the fragility and vulnerability of my childhood, and connect that sensitivity to the horrors of contemporary life. I want to be susceptible to the world around me once again. As my anxiety and uncertainty builds with the oncoming changes our society is facing, I want to reunite with my vulnerability, reigniting my ability to cope with and embrace the unsettling nature of life.

How will we deal with the future monsters of our imaginations if our imaginations are slowly dwindling? Will we become a society impervious or disconnected to the notion of fear or will we become the exact opposite, terrified of everything, so we never leave the comfort of our home? I find myself asking these questions throughout the stages of my creative process, allowing my uneasiness and uncertainty to feed my intuition. The heaviness of these questions will continue to drive my future work and exploration of the subject as we travel further into the digital unknown.



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## VITA

Jenni Lombardi was born and raised in Montville, New Jersey, a town located approximately 40-minutes outside of New York City. She spent most of her formative years commuting into the city, enjoying the numerous museums, galleries, and artworks in abundance, as well as immersing herself in the bustling nightlife of the Big Apple. She graduated from William Paterson University of New Jersey in 2011, with a BFA in Studio Art. While she began her undergraduate study with a concentration in painting, through artistic discovery, Jenni found that she had an affinity for sculpting with clay and could execute her ideas and style more successfully in the 3-dimensional world. Since transitioning, and eventually fully embracing clay as her new primary medium, Jenni has exhibited in a number of invitational and public shows and galleries throughout New Jersey, New York City, Louisiana, and Missouri. Before deciding upon further education, she was an active member and an apprentice to the Sculptor's Guild of New York City for 2 years, providing aid in exhibition set-up and sculpting for commissioned projects. Jenni Lombardi decided to pursue graduate study in the field of ceramics at Louisiana State University's School of Art and Design. Jenni is expecting to graduate from LSU with a Master of Fine Arts in ceramics in December of 2016.